Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars

Edited by Assaf Moghadam, Vladimir Rauta and Michel Wyss

ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF PROXY WARS

This Handbook is the first volume to comprehensively examine the challenges, intricacies, and dynamics of proxy wars, in their various facets.

The volume aims to capture the significantly growing interest in the topic at a critical juncture when wars of many guises are becoming multifaceted proxy wars. Most often, proxy wars have wide-ranging implications for international security and are, therefore, a critically important subject of inquiry. The Handbook seeks to understand and explain proxy wars conceptually, theoretically, and empirically, with a focus on the numerous policy challenges and dilemmas they pose. To do so, it presents a multi- and interdisciplinary assessment of proxy wars focused on the causes, dynamics, and processes underpinning the phenomenon, across time and space and a multitude of actors throughout human history. The Handbook is divided into six thematic sections, as follows:

Part I: Approaches to the Study of Proxy Wars
Part II: Historical Perspectives on Proxy Wars
Part III: Actors in Proxy Wars
Part IV: Dynamics of Proxy Wars
Part V: Case Studies of Proxy Wars
Part VI: The Future of Proxy Wars

By bringing together many leading scholars in a synthesis of expertise, this Handbook provides a unique and rigorous account of research into proxy war, which so far has been largely missing from the debate.

This book will be of much interest to students of strategic studies, security studies, foreign policy, political violence, and international relations.

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To the little lion
AM, VR, and MW

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Routledge
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1

THE STUDY OF PROXY WARS

Assaf Moghadam, Vladimir Rauta, and Michel Wyss[1]

Figure 1.1 "I'm War, and This Is Cyber War, Cold War and Proxy War."
Source: By kind permission of The Spectator 1828 Ltd.

War and conflict are as old as human existence and have always eluded simplistic explanations and conceptualizations. And yet, even more than its historical antecedents, war in the twenty-first century rejects any neat categorizations. Like in *The Spectator* cartoon, labels of war "queue" to attach themselves to political violence that takes on many guises: between states; between states and armed non-state actors; and, increasingly so, between armed non-state actors. It is hard to think of a war that neatly fits one label, nor can we think of a label that neatly fits one war. Students of war and conflict have expanded the scope of their analysis beyond established categories of inter- and intra-state war, while attempting to account for the many changes through which war has gone, technological and otherwise. The notion of "proxy war" stands out in this crowded semantic field of contemporary conflict: it is emotive and evocative, provocative and pejorative, often commended and criticized, renamed and reified, rejected and replaced. It is almost the perfect essentially contestable concept, if only its empirical manifestations were not essentially uncontestable realities. Proxy wars have supposedly acquired a certain reputation for Machiavellian misery and mischief. The term is said to describe wars of strategists toiling in obscurity and mumbling geopolitical nostrums the likes of "the enemy of my enemy

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1 The views and opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Swiss Armed Forces, the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport, or any other agency of the Swiss government.

is my friend." Consequently, proxy wars seem caught between a rock and a hard place: a bad reputation and "a superficially seductive policy option" (Hughes, 2014, 523).

The *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars* seeks to conduct an intellectual reset of the debate on proxy wars. It is the first volume of its kind tasked with comprehensively making sense of the challenges, intricacies, and dynamics of proxy wars. Proxy wars are a fascinating subject to study on their own, relevant to scholars and policymakers alike. Over the last decade, "proxy war" as an idea has followed "proxy war" as an event, taking center stage in international security debates: the rapid expansion of the literature mapped onto the quick transformation of many contemporary conflicts into complex proxy wars, just as the term entered the lexicon of national security and defense strategies. This is unsurprising, for proxy wars have wide-ranging implications for international security and are, therefore, a critically important subject of inquiry. Existing studies have shown that the provision of external support to belligerents in civil wars, insurgencies, and other forms of political violence internationalizes these armed conflicts, raises their lethality rate, and increases the likelihood of conflict relapse. Conflicts involving proxies occur in regions that are of high strategic significance, with implications that transcend geographic boundaries (for a recent review of the state of the literature see Karlén *et al.*, 2021). Proxy conflicts not only occur in particularly violent-prone regions, such as the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but have also been a feature of post–World War II Europe. The Russian incursion of its Western neighbor since 2014, culminating with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, has shown that even regions presumed to no longer being able to produce major shocks to the international system are susceptible to the dangerous dynamics of proxy war.

In fact, few, if any, of the armed conflicts of recent memory speak as clearly to the politicized and contested nature of proxy wars as the war in Ukraine, which is ongoing at the time of this writing. For example, while a number of academics and former US officials have argued that the United States and its European allies are engaged in a proxy war with Russia (Bloomberg, 2022; Wyss, 2022; Winter-Levy, 2022; Brands, 2022), others have pushed back (Rauta and Stark, 2022; Hughes, 2022). The Biden administration emphatically rejected the label on political grounds, denouncing it as "Kremlin talking points" (Knox, 2022), whereas some scholars scrutinized the term's putative Cold War origins, arguing that "[t]he idea of proxy wars has always been misleading" because it suggests that "local forces are there to serve the interests of the foreigners" (Freedman, 2022).

Proxy war dynamics were indeed a prominent feature of the Cold War, where the United States and the Soviet Union often relied on state or non-state proxies to do their bidding. Accordingly, Cold War–era studies of proxy wars aligned with the logic of great power competition. At the same time, contemporary depictions of the early proxy war scholarship, which supposedly conceived of small states and non-state actors as mere puppets and "pawns in a much greater game" (Groh, 2019, 2), are themselves misleading. They are based on a perfunctory reading of a literature that, while unquestionably state-centric, offered far more nuanced arguments about potentially diverging interests (Dinerstein, 1958), sponsor-proxy interaction (Bissell, 1978), and proxy agency (Gross Stein, 1980) than its detractors would allow.

Furthermore, while proxy war scholarship emerged in earnest in the context of the Cold War, several studies (as well as some of the chapters in this volume) point to numerous antecedents throughout recorded history. And even beyond contemporary scholars using modern terminology and conceptual lenses to describe pre-modern proxy wars, it is worth noting that the idea itself predates the period of US-Soviet competition. In 1915, British author Sydney Brooks remarked that the fact that "so many millions of Americans claimed kinship with the belligerents on one side or the other" gave the Great War "something of

the character of a civil war by proxy" (Brooks, 1915, 232). Some 20 years later, O.W. Riegel, an early scholar of propaganda, argued that the "the presence in the conflict of political and economic issues of international significance has tended to make the Spanish conflict in fact a 'proxy war,' and has roused grave fears that other nations may be involved in a general European or world war" (Riegel, 1937, 131). Beyond the confines of the English language, there are even older references such as nineteenth-century French historian French Albert Vandal describing how France in the War of the Polish Succession relied – in his view mistakenly – on the Ottomans to occupy Russia, thus waging a "guerre par procuration" (war by proxy) instead of fighting the Russians directly (Vandal, 1885, 44). The very idea of "proxy war" has, thus, been around at the very least since the late nineteenth century, challenging conventional wisdom that has traditionally situated its intellectual creation during the early years of the Cold War (Russell and Boyett, 1958, 128). Exploring early and even pre-twentieth-century notions of proxy war may well offer novel insights not only into the emergence of the idea specifically but into the conceptions of war and international relations at the time more generally. Importantly, this comes at a time in which proxy wars have gone through considerable diversification of their local, regional, and international dynamics (Moghadam and Wyss, 2018).

This growing complexity has been reflected in new lines of inquiry alongside novel theoretical and methodological approaches reminiscent of similar advancements in the study of civil wars and non-state armed groups. As was argued recently, not only are we witnessing the "end of the beginning" of the study of proxy wars (Rauta, 2021a) but also the emergence of proxy war studies, a newly identified research cluster and subfield with a distinctive intellectual disciplinary orientation, galvanized around a notion of relative conceptual autonomy and, more importantly, one that embraces intellectual and theoretical diversity, interdisciplinarity, and methodological pluralism. The present study of proxy wars is doing just fine: proxy wars are not understudied; proxy wars are not underconceptualized; proxy wars are not undertheorized.

The *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars* not only acknowledges this diversity and pluralism in approaches but embraces and champions it. Taken together, the *Handbook* captures the significantly growing interest in the problem of proxy wars at a critical juncture in this highly topical and evolving line of inquiry. It does so by bringing together leading established and early career scholars of proxy wars from various disciplinary backgrounds. The contributors to this *Handbook* provide a diverse, integrative, and pluralistic take on the subject, combining insights from multiple intellectual and disciplinary traditions. The result is not just an exceptional scholarly exchange with considerable policy implications, but the founding of a research program subsumed under a new research subfield: proxy war studies.

Proxy War – Concept, Definition, and Levels of Analysis

Considering the developments described earlier, the compilation of a handbook on proxy wars is overdue. While recent scholarship has advanced several conceptual takes on proxy wars (Rauta, 2018, 2021b; Moghadam and Wyss, 2020; Karlén *et al.*, 2021; Thaler, 2022), the *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars* proposes a novel analytical framework for approaching the study of proxy wars that bridges between three key conceptualizations, as reflected in the literature and in existing definitions. The empirical variation of proxy wars suggests that they can be conceptualized along three axes, or levels of analysis, that are not mutually exclusive: as a *logic*, as a *relationship*, and as a *process*. The framework that we offer accepts the validity of all three conceptual axes, acknowledges the value of intellectual inquiry centralizing along each of these

axes separately, while also emphasizing the need to offer a synthetic analysis along multiple axes. Put differently, our analytical framework adopts a level of analysis approach that enables students of proxy wars to understand and analyze this phenomenon with a more holistic set of intellectual tools that incorporate insights from competing perspectives of proxy wars as seen through a lens of their logic, their constituent relationships, and the processes that shape and affect these conflicts. In so doing, we begin by acknowledging the theoretical need to match the rich empirical diversity of phenomena encompassed by, or related to, the term "proxy war": external support to insurgents, state-sponsored terrorism, the outsourcing of security tasks to domestic militias, security force assistance, and "building partner capacity" in friendly host nations. We then shift the conceptual debate onto a substantive footing, away from the terminological focus often found in the literature: rebel patronage and clientelism, informal/transnational alliances, paramilitary operations, internationalized conflict, indirect interstate conflict, subversion, or military aid. As the *Handbook* shows, there are no *semi-*, *quasi-*, or *neo*-proxy wars, and there is no such thing as *new* or *old* proxy wars.

As a *logic*, proxy wars substitute the direct use of force. They can thus be understood as indirect armed conflicts between two or more actors in which at least one of these actors entrusts another party to fight on their behalf (Rauta, 2018). The external party is usually referred to as the sponsor/principal, and it delegates military action to an agent that is typically referred to as a proxy/client. While the literature identifies most sponsors as states, and most proxies as non-state actors, both sponsors and proxies can be either state or non-state actors (Moghadam and Wyss, 2020). While some of their political and military ends may overlap, sponsors and proxies typically have distinct motivations for engaging in proxy war. Whereas the former seek to pursue their strategic interests while avoiding the various costs and risks associated with employing their own armed forces, the latter are typically interested in augmenting their fighting power and/or their political influence. Proxy wars are, thus, often considered a means for managing escalation that enables sponsors to avert direct military confrontations with their opponents. However, the historical record suggests that such supposed benefits are often overstated. Furthermore, even if external parties aim to keep the scope of such a military confrontation limited, their proxies may regard the conflict as an all-out war and "might, in extreme desperation, act so as to expand the war" (Dinerstein, 1958, 108).

As a *relationship*, proxy wars encompass the range of interactions between sponsors and proxies. At its core, their relationship consists of a reciprocal exchange. The sponsor provides its proxy with some form – and in most instances, a combination – of military, economic, or diplomatic assistance. In return, the proxy engages in armed combat and carries out related military or security tasks that align with the sponsor's desired end state in a given conflict theater. The relationship between sponsors and proxies exhibits similarities with other collaborative interactions, albeit with its own distinct properties. They are typically less formalized than military alliances and, unlike other forms of security partnerships, do not encompass mutual rights and obligations, with the sponsor's aims ultimately being superordinate to those of the proxy. This is not to imply that proxies function as mere extensions of their sponsors and are devoid of any agency. Rather, the informal and often ambiguous nature of these relationships – a frequent consequence of the sponsor's desire to keep its involvement covert or even secret – offers proxies opportunities to manipulate the former's perceptions, shirk commitments, and divert resources according to their own principal aims. Conversely, a sponsor can take various actions in order to discourage undesirable behavior by the proxy, or rein in such behavior where it is already occurring. Such actions may consist of benevolent inducements, but under some circumstances may entail coercive measures, up to and including the threat of abandonment. In essence, each proxy relationship occurs on a continuum between pure cooperation and pure coercion. To borrow

from Michael Handel, such a relationship exhibits "different degrees of intensity, dependence, and exploitation . . . from an almost symbiotic relationship to a situation of almost unilateral exploitation" (1990, 133). Finally, it is worth considering that the prototypical sponsor–proxy dyad is an oversimplification. Proxy relations often consist of complex configurations, including intermediary sponsors, multiple sponsors (at times with diverging interests), collective sponsors, or several proxies in one conflict theater vying for support by the same sponsor (Karlén *et al.*, 2021, 2058–2060; Karlén and Rauta, 2023).

As a *process*, proxy wars permit an assessment of the variation of modalities in which this form of war is waged. The course, manifestations, consequences, and implications of proxy wars are determined and affected by complex dynamics governing the interactions of not only its principal parties (i.e., sponsor, proxy, and the proxy's adversary) but a wide range of additional stakeholders. These can include, for example, external backers of other belligerents; the local population, or specific segments thereof, in the conflict theater; domestic audiences such as the sponsor's electorate and political elites; as well as supranational institutions and the broader "international community," to name only a few.

Furthermore, this process is influenced by other factors such as cultural and legal norms, political and economic constraints, as well as considerations both at the tactical and strategic levels. Simply put, proxy wars will differ from one another, each with their own particularities. In some instances, sponsors will exploit pre-existing conditions such as social tensions or ethnic cleavages in a given region to establish a proxy that will serve their strategic ambitions prior to the onset of active hostilities. In other cases, however, states or non-state actors already engaged in armed conflict will be the ones reaching out to potential sponsors in hopes that receiving external assistance will help them turn the tide of war in their favor. Some sponsors put a premium on "plausible deniability" (for a critical discussion, see Karlén and Rauta, 2023) and will go to great lengths to disguise, or at least obscure, their indirect involvement in an ongoing armed conflict. In other instances, such concealment will be neither realistic nor desirable. Instead, supplying its proxy with large quantities of increasingly sophisticated weapon systems may be understood as an attempt by the sponsor to signal resolve vis-à-vis their shared adversary. There is considerable variation in the breadth and depth of the interactions between sponsor and proxy. Some proxies will have to make do with limited material assistance and training but will retain a relatively high degree of autonomous decision-making. In other cases, sponsors will deploy small teams of military advisors to assist in planning and executing military operations, give access to intelligence and targeting data, and even provide air support or indirect fires, with the proxy effectively becoming integrated in the sponsor's chain-of-command in all but name. In rare cases, the relations between sponsor and proxy extend beyond a specific conflict theater and endure over several decades. It is far more likely, however, that the sponsor will end its support upon attaining its desired ends or that either of the parties will choose to abandon or defect from the other if the probabilities of success prove increasingly unlikely. Conversely, a sponsor may also decide to double-down and escalate from indirect to direct military intervention when faced with such prospects. To summarize, our framework not only lends itself to integrating different theoretical and methodological approaches, but also enables students and scholars of proxy wars to examine the topic through different levels of analysis, all while building upon a unified conceptual foundation. For that matter, each of the chapters in this *Handbook* can be situated along one or more of the three levels described earlier. To circle back to the discussion on the war in Ukraine, the purpose of our framework is not so much to engage in a tedious debate on whether or not a specific armed conflict can, or should, be classified as a proxy war but to provide an analytical tool that can help illuminate some of the most pressing and prevalent dynamics of contemporary warfare.

Handbook Aims

We employ this conceptual framework with four aims in mind. First, the *Handbook* seeks to take stock of the current state of the academic debate on proxy wars. To that end, it offers a cumulative assessment of the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological diversity of research on proxy wars. Doing so, the *Handbook* offers the first comprehensive treatment of the current state of academic analysis on proxy wars, in its various facets. Second, the *Handbook* provides scholars and practitioners interested in proxy wars with a rich source of empirical cases of such conflicts, covering both historical proxy conflicts and contemporary hotspots. These empirical chapters can assist interested scholars in teasing out key "lessons learned" about the causes, nature, termination, and consequences of specific proxy wars. They can also contribute to the formulation of theoretical and empirical analyses of broader trends that cut across individual cases. Taken together, the empirical contributions in this *Handbook* form a basis for scholars seeking to devise new hypotheses and draw inferences on a variety of questions, from determinants and risk factors of proxy wars to variables affecting the nature of sponsor-proxy relationships, and from conditions affecting the outcome of proxy wars to factors affecting their long-term repercussions. These inform the third objective pursued in this *Handbook*, namely, to map puzzles and problems that point at the transformative role that proxy wars will be playing in the contemporary security environment in the foreseeable future. Finally, the fourth, and most ambitious, objective of the *Handbook* is to harness the newly expanded debate on proxy wars to set the premises, draw the contours, and outline a research agenda for the rapidly growing subfield of proxy war studies. In developing the *proxy war studies* framework, we venture beyond the traditional scope of similar handbooks, most of which pursue more limited aims, that is, to take stock of an existing state of a discipline or issue, rather than taking active steps in advancing a novel subfield of studies.

Proxy war studies is an intellectual project developed around the rich, diverse, plural, creative, and innovative exchanges of ideas presented in this *Handbook*. Proxy war studies is an effort to match this exceptional body of knowledge to a sense and clarity of purpose. Its central aim is to make the study of proxy wars specific, identifiable, comparable, and researchable from different perspectives and methodologies, while outlining a vision for the future of a debate that takes its motivation from the challenges proxy wars pose to international security in the twenty-first century. Proxy war studies is also an attempt to shape and foster an epistemic community, actively and consciously preoccupied by questions and puzzles around its object of inquiry. Our proposed field is fundamentally about a scholarly community pursuing knowledge as a collective achievement.

Proxy war studies starts from a simple assumption: much like there is no "right" definition of proxy wars, there is no "best" theory, no "certain" method, no "more relevant" region in which to observe the phenomenon. As discussed, we can think of proxy wars as a *logic*, as a *relationship*, and as a *process*. Each presents research questions and puzzles that challenge the ingenuity and intuition of several theoretical frameworks: alliance theory (Borghard, 2014), strategic interaction (Rauta, 2020), principal-agent theory (Karlén *et al.*, 2021), and its critical updates (Rittinger, 2017), strategic bargaining (Maoz and San-Akca, 2012), or securitization theory (Farasoo, 2021). In addition, there is equal empirical power in the study of idiosyncratic, micro-level proxy wars as is in observing macro-level patterns, and to do with both the patience of the archival researcher and with the foresight of the statistician. We take note of the ongoing bridge-building efforts and place these at the center of the field: across traditions of research (Karlén *et al.*, 2021) or across the lands of academia and policy where projects like the *Irregular Warfare Initiative* have made possible exceptional exchanges. We seek to establish proxy war studies as a field of inquiry whose strength lies in its ability to foster and drive debate

across research programs, a space for creative and productive conversations, at times even contradictory ones.

Handbook Structure

The *Handbook* is divided into 34 chapters, organized into six parts. Part I, titled "Approaches to the Study of Proxy Wars," consists of seven chapters and provides the reader with a general overview of the study of proxy wars, showcases several different scholarly approaches, and offers some reflections on how proxy wars intersect with different social phenomena. In Chapter 2, Matthew Wiger of King's College London and Kyle Atwell of Princeton University present different causal logics for why sponsors outsource violence and why proxies seek out and accept the former's help. They argue that sponsors partner with proxies when pursuing limited strategic objectives or when facing constraints on direct intervention. Proxies, in contrast, seek out support by sponsors in an effort to overcome various tangible weaknesses or shortcomings. They will team up with ideologically aligned partners where they can, but will show far greater flexibility in partner selection where they must. In Chapter 3, Vanessa Meier reviews quantitative approaches to proxy war studies and presents several key quantitative findings related to the causes, configurations, and consequences of outside interference in armed conflicts. Meier, a conflict scholar at the University of Oxford, introduces readers to key datasets and discusses the main challenges associated with data collection in a field that, so far, has been dominated by qualitative approaches. She argues convincingly that quantitative approaches can help scholars sharpen their conceptual analysis, thereby creating more reliable findings. Following Meier's quantitative focus, in Chapter 4, Alexandra Chinchilla of Texas A&M University explores how formal theory has contributed to the study of proxy conflicts, and how such models can address some of the more recent puzzles of proxy conflicts going forward. Relying on principal–agent theory, Chinchilla's chapter hones in on the question of how principals can incentivize compliance from their proxies. Compliance problems are often caused by information asymmetries between sponsors and proxies and are exacerbated by commitment problems. That said, Chinchilla argues that with the appropriate combination of carrots and sticks, principals can mitigate these problems and increase the level of compliance on the part of their proxies.

In Chapter 5, Hannah Chesterton of the Catholic University of America teams up with American University's Tricia Bacon, a former State Department intelligence analyst, to identify similarities and differences between state sponsorship of terrorism and proxy wars. The authors identify several key differences but note that both concepts are akin to each other in that they involve principal–agent relationships that require careful management of conflicting interests and moral hazard. In Chapter 6, Magda Long of King's College London compares and contrasts proxy wars with covert action, citing both as a "middle option" situated in between overt military engagements, diplomacy, and doing nothing. She shows that covert action often involves the use of proxies, illustrating this point with examples from both the George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations, who relied on proxies to facilitate regime change in Iraq and Serbia. In Chapter 7, Daphné Richemond-Barak of Reichman University dissects proxy wars from an international law perspective. Showing that international law has neglected proxy wars to date, she goes on to argue that the main reason for this neglect is that international law is primarily occupied with the prevention and containment of war. Were international law to recognize proxy wars, it would hopelessly expand the legal and geographical scope of the state of war. International legal scholars have consequently opted to avoid the topic instead – an approach that can no longer realistically be upheld. Anna A. Meier of the University of Nottingham and Layla E. Picard of the University of Virginia bookend Part I of the *Handbook* by

scrutinizing the state of diversity in the field of proxy war studies in Chapter 8. They find that existing intellectual frameworks of proxy wars are often applied uncritically, thereby inadvertently reproducing colonial narratives or political propaganda. They call upon proxy war scholars to pay closer attention to three distinct axes of diversity to avoid such pitfalls: authors' sympathies or alignments with certain parties or factions; their degree of local knowledge (or lack thereof); and their positionality relative to hegemonic discourses of knowledge and politics.

Historical approaches to proxy wars have featured prominently among scholarly treatments of the subject and are reviewed over the course of four chapters in Part II of the handbook, "Historical Perspectives on Proxy Wars." Geraint Hughes, a seasoned diplomatic and military historian at King's College London, opens Part II with a "Longue Durée" historical review in Chapter 9. His chapter traces pre–Cold War precedents for proxy warfare before noting several key examples of proxy conflicts from the medieval, early modern, and modern eras. These historical cases produce several insights on the causes and consequences of proxy wars, including difficulties of controlling proxies; internal disputes among the state sponsors over the merits of adopting a proxy strategy; and the grim reality that clients are often sacrificed and betrayed at will. Further, proxy conflicts can exacerbate conflict between sponsors. Hughes suggests that historical examples also show that "who uses whom" in proxy relationships is not always clear. And finally, proxy conflicts can have significant unintended consequences for sponsors and proxies alike. In Chapter 10, Giuseppe Spatafora, a doctoral student at Oxford, zooms in on the case of the Spanish Civil War to examine why external powers decided to sponsor belligerent parties in this conflict; how states dealt with the risk of escalation; how they managed interactions with other states and sponsors; and what effect such interventions had on the duration, level of violence, and outcome of the conflict for the involved parties, and for international relations more broadly. Competing perspectives on proxy conflicts on the part of the superpowers during the Cold War is the subject that Yaacov Falkov, a lecturer at Reichman University, takes up in Chapter 11. During the Cold War, proxy wars followed a strategy aimed at avoiding a catastrophic nuclear confrontation among the two major geopolitical blocs. Nevertheless, some proxy wars brought humanity to the brink of catastrophe. Ultimately, the United States outperformed the Soviet Union in its ability to employ proxies to attain strategic ends, as most vividly displayed in the US involvement in Afghanistan during the 1980s, which hastened the Soviet retreat from the "Third World" and foreshadowed the collapse of the USSR shortly afterward. In the final chapter of Part II, Alexandra Stark, an expert on defense and security at RAND, evaluates how the international system has shaped the evolution of proxy wars from the post–World War II period through the present. Following a brief respite from the heavy reliance on proxy actors during the Cold War after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Stark shows how the Global War on Terror spawned a resurgence of proxy conflicts through a counterterrorism framework that saw the US military partnering with governments via training and equipping their military forces, or by deploying US Special Forces to train and fight alongside local government forces and allied non-state armed groups – an approach termed "by-with-through" by former US Central Command commander, Gen. Joseph Votel. The contemporary multipolar order defined by great power competition, Stark argues, will add even greater complexity to this problem set.

Part III of the *Handbook*, titled "Actors in Proxy Wars," addresses the interplay between proxy wars and a number of related actors and communities. Ben Hammett and Vladimir Rauta of the University of Reading open the discussion of actors in Chapter 13 with a look at the relationship between militias and proxy actors. Using the case of Sudan, Hammett and Rauta distinguish between two models of interaction between militias and the state, auxiliary and proxy, with the latter having less oversight on the part of the state. These models are not static, and the chapter

explores how militias shift their orientation, how they may fragment or, alternatively, can be subsumed within the state. Even though the use of these militias is best understood through the framework of conflict delegation, a key conclusion of the chapter is that these sub-state actors develop and make use of strategic agency. In Chapter 14, Haian Dukhan and Francesco Belcastro of Teesside University and the University of Derby, respectively, explore the connection between tribes and proxy wars. Centering their analysis on the Middle East, the authors discuss why and how local and international actors rely on tribes to achieve their military goals, and what implications such partnerships have had on peace and stability in the region. Relying on tribes, they argue, can help states meet some local challenges. On the cost side, however, such delegation can have detrimental consequences on states' claims of control and sovereignty. Two case studies – US counterinsurgency efforts against al-Qaeda in Iraq, and the use of tribes by multiple parties in the Syrian civil war – illustrate these findings. Chapter 15 looks at the relationship between organized crime and proxy conflicts. Here, Colin P. Clarke of the Soufan Group and Phil Williams of the University of Pittsburgh place the contemporary instrumental use of organized crime by sponsors in proxy conflicts in a broader historical context, arguing that organized crime has been exploited by states as instruments of geopolitical competition for centuries. The nexus between organized crime and nation-states is only likely to intensify in the modern information age, which is marked by a diffusion of international crime and emerging technologies. The role of diasporas in connection with proxy wars is explored by Sara Daub of the Hertie School in Chapter 16. Diaspora support differs from external state support in important ways, from the sources and motivations of support to the means and types of support provided. Diasporas are often drawn into the conflict by kinship support or feelings of guilt, and often send foreign fighters or financial support to their kin, rather than direct military support. Diasporas are also more susceptible to pressures by rebel groups to provide support, and their assistance tends to be more reliable than that of state sponsors. Finally, diasporas have greater stakes in reducing harm to civilians than most state supporters, and will therefore be inclined to support long-term solutions, including those involving rebel governance.

In Part IV of the *Handbook*, titled "Dynamics of Proxy Wars," some of the main processes playing out in historical and contemporary proxy wars are explored in six chapters. Sara Plana, currently at the US Department of Defense and a recent graduate of the doctoral program at MIT, addresses the topic of proxy control in Chapter 17. Citing power as the core component of control, Plana posits that states seek three different forms of control over their proxies: control over discreet issues; control over the proxy's choices or range of actions; or control by shaping the proxy's preferences. Each of these options carries different costs, produces varying chances of success, and affects the durability and nature of the relationship. The conditions under which the use of proxies can have successful outcomes is the main issue explored in Chapter 18. Penned by Liam Collins and Alex Deep, a retired and a current U.S. Army Special Forces officer, respectively, the chapter examines several cases that saw US involvement, from the Bay of Pigs invasion to El Salvador, and from Nicaragua to Afghanistan and Syria, among others. Based on their case studies, Collins and Deep argue that such engagements of proxies produced better results when the United States used specially trained advisors; kept the advisory effort small; conducted training and advising close to the theater of operations; built a proxy attuned to the relevant environment; and ensured long-term, sustained engagement. When it comes to engaging, and especially arming proxies, sponsors face several legal and ethical challenges, and these are explored by Emory University's Laurie R. Blank in Chapter 19. Blank analyzes the legality of the provision of arms to rebel proxy groups through multiple legal frameworks, focusing in particular on the question of how the law seeks to ensure that ethical goals are upheld in the process. The chapter reviews the arms control regime relevant to the arming of non-state

groups before going into whether arming of such groups violates international law, applying the framework of *jus ad bellum*, sovereignty, and non-intervention in the process. Chapter 20 by Amos C. Fox, a doctoral candidate at the University of Reading, focuses on how states can confront proxy wars. Strategies to confront proxy wars, he argues, require as a first step exposing the principal's involvement in a proxy war to the international community. If necessary, the next step should then involve decoupling the proxy dyad by identifying the correct type and degree of pressure to apply against the bond. The weak link of each dyadic bond depends on the type of sponsor–proxy relationship. In Chapter 21, Niklas Karlén of the Swedish Defence University addresses an important and understudied puzzle: what makes some proxy relationships endure while others break down? Karlén argues that preference alignment, including ideational convergence along identities, norms, and values, is the key variable affecting the nature and duration of these relationships. Karlén also discusses why sponsor-proxy relationships can break down completely, positing that the decision of a sponsor to end support can be rooted in proxy behavior, interstate relationships, domestic audiences, or external pressures. In the final chapter of Part IV, Andrew Mumford of the University of Nottingham revisits the consequences of proxy wars. The historical record of proxy wars suggests that the influx of weapons and funds prolongs a conflict. Proxy wars also produce a host of unintended consequences, some with delayed effect. Mumford suggests that efforts to remove weapons from conflict zones, and avenues of reintegration of former proxies into societies following the departure of foreign interventions are promising avenues to reduce blowback from proxy war and increase chances for peaceful transformation of such conflicts.

Part V, "Case Studies of Proxy Wars," takes a deep dive into empirical manifestations of proxy wars in the form of nine case studies. In Chapter 23, Erin Kimball Damman of the University of Idaho and Christopher Day of the College of Charleston review proxy wars in Africa. Damman and Day argue that while the geopolitical context of Africa's state system, including a robust set of regional norms constraining interference, has largely prevented interstate conflict in Africa, African regimes have found alternative ways to meddle in each other's affairs through different "iterations" of proxy warfare. These have included various means of deploying or inviting armed non-state actors to project power across borders, most recently through the framework of peacekeeping. In Chapter 24, Hilary Matfess of the University of Denver and Terrence Lyons of George Mason University cover the substantial history of intervention by proxy in the Horn of Africa. Their study reveals that the Horn of Africa is unusual in that many proxy actors that it spawned succeeded in establishing new regimes and even new states in places such as South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somaliland – where these new regimes have gone on to sponsor their own "second-generation" proxies. Case studies in the Horn of Africa also illustrate the highly fluid dynamics of power, hierarchy, and influence in proxy warfare, as the lines between sponsors and proxies often blur. Chapter 25 offers an overview of proxy wars in the Middle East – a region that is no stranger to foreign powers using local actors to attain their ends, or to Middle Eastern states supporting various local armed groups to pursue specific aims. Deakin University's Shahram Akbarzadeh and William Gourlay observe stepped-up efforts by regional states in recent years in their use of proxies as a "low-cost" strategy to achieve their political objectives. To bring home this point, they survey the activities of five key players – Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Nakissa Jahanbani of the United States Military Academy at West Point and Suzanne Weedon Levy of the University at Albany take up Iran's proxy strategy in Chapter 26. Crafted as a response to the 9/11 conflicts, Iran's proxy activities have spread to several regions, including the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, and South America, as well as to cyber-space, with the nature of Tehran's relationship with its clients taking different forms in each region. While Iran's proxy strategy comes at great financial

cost, Jahanbani and Levy show that Tehran has employed it with great skill, projecting power and influence against their adversaries, while maintaining plausible deniability. One of the parties supported by Tehran via its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are the Iraq-based Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), which is the subject of Chapter 27. Written by Inna Rudolf of King's College London, the chapter pays particular attention to the shared ideological vision that lies at the root of this sponsor-proxy partnership, specifically the desire to guarantee the security of Iraq's Shiite communities and protection of their religious heritage and sanctuaries. Rudolf discusses in detail the tension arising from the different factions within the PMU pursuing competing aims. In consequence, the PMU are engaged in a balancing act between their proximity to the Islamic Republic of Iran and their often-contradictory domestic interests, including the PMU leadership's attempts to avoid spoiling the relationship with Iraqi authorities. In Chapter 28, Gregory Johnsen of the Brookings Institution and Thomas Juneau of the University of Ottawa team up to shed light on the proxy conflict in Yemen. The authors dissect the role played by Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE in the conflict by examining the identity of their partners on the ground; the nature of their support; and the drivers of these relationships. Here too, the authors find that Iran is the most skilled player of the "proxy game." Nevertheless, Johnsen and Juneau conclude that the local partners of the meddling powers are much more than pliable local puppets. They are actors with interests of their own, and little hesitation to act toward their advancement. In Chapter 29, Andrew S. Bowen of the Congressional Research Service looks at proxy wars in the post-Soviet space, taking stock of several proxy conflicts that emerged since the fall of the Soviet Union, including state-supported mercenaries and other subcontractors in the South Caucasus and Ukraine. Proxy conflicts in the post-Soviet space exhibit trends that have been identified in other cases as well: Bowen finds, first, that the nature and relationship of sponsor-proxy relationships are fluid and dynamic. Sponsors can adjust control when necessary, while proxies can enhance their power. Second, there is a broad range in the type and motivations of proxies: while ideology matters, it is often enmeshed with other drivers, including organized crime and personal loyalty. South Asia is another region that has seen its fair share of proxy wars, and this case study is addressed by Deakin University's Abbas Farasoo and Monash University's Farkhondeh Akbari in Chapter 30. The authors evaluate the indirect intervention strategies of India and Pakistan, arguing that while India worked mostly through states as proxies, Pakistan's preferred partners were of the non-state actor variety. The bulk of the chapter pivots toward a discussion on Afghanistan. The chapter recounts the persistent attempts by its Pakistani neighbor to control Afghan politics by establishing a proxy regime in Kabul, and by turning Afghanistan into a sanctuary where jihadist fighters could receive shelter and training. The final case study of Part V focuses on Latin America where, in Chapter 31, Jorge Mantilla of the University of Illinois at Chicago uses an interventionist framework to explore regional proxy dynamics. Since the 1960s, the United States assured its hegemony over most of Latin America, while Cuba became a sponsor of guerrilla and insurrection. Another central aspect affecting subsequent proxy war dynamics in Latin America was the rise of right-wing military regimes in Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina.

Finally, in Part VI of the *Handbook*, titled "The Future of Proxy Wars," several contributors offer their assessment of how proxy wars may evolve in the years to come. In Chapter 32, Kerstin Zettl-Schabath of Heidelberg University highlights offensive operations in the digital sphere by cyber-proxies. Her chapter compares these cyber-proxies to their analog counterparts and discusses motives of the mostly autocratic states in employing cyber-operations. While Zettl argues that cyber-operations have not yet amounted to the status of an armed attack or use of force, there are nevertheless several important ways in which such operations have affected conflict dynamics. In Chapter 33, the National Defense University's Frank G. Hoffman and Andrew

Orner of King's College London explore the character of proxy wars through the lens of great power competition, where conventional warfare remains a major concern given its potentially catastrophic consequences. These dynamics heighten the importance of proxy war as an important strategic tool short of full-scale interstate conflict. One implication is the growing reliance by countries such as Russia and China on private military contractors such as the Russia-sponsored Wagner Group, which will continue to impact international stability in the foreseeable future. Chapter 34 completes the *Handbook* with a discussion of a possible return of "Great Power Proxy Wars." Erin K. Jenne of Central European University and David S. Siroky of the University of Essex argue that over the past decade, the international stage has witnessed a return of symmetrical proxy wars reminiscent of the Cold War period. This is most clearly exemplified by an increasingly revanchist Russia that has been facing off against Western power in Syria and Ukraine. Jenne and Siroky believe that these types of proxy wars are more likely to occur during periods of heightened great power rivalry and in states that straddle rival security hierarchies.

The chapters that make up the present handbook together reflect the state of the art in research about proxy wars, one of the most critical challenges for contemporary international security. It is the hope of the editors that the discussions contained in this compendium will assist students, scholars, and practitioners interested in this problem in offering a better understanding of previous and ongoing proxy wars. We also hope and believe that the *Handbook* will raise some thought-provoking questions about the future evolution of proxy conflicts, thereby serving as a foundation for a future research agenda on a topic that is here to stay with us.

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Approaches to the Study of Proxy Wars

2

CAUSAL LOGICS OF PROXY WARS

Matthew Wiger and Kyle Atwell[1]

Since the end of World War II, proxy warfare has become a dominant form of conflict. From great powers avoiding nuclear confrontation during the Cold War, to lesser powers with regional ambitions in the complex, post–Arab Spring Middle East, states have frequently turned to proxy warfare to avoid the dangerous escalation risks and high costs associated with direct conflict. Proxy wars incur many hazards for the sponsor and proxy alike. Sponsors often struggle to control their partners. Though cheaper than direct military intervention, proxy wars still carry significant costs. The delegation of conflict rarely delivers strategic breakthrough to the external actor. For their part, proxies deal with overbearing or fickle sponsors and can suffer devastating loss of local legitimacy or international opprobrium for the provenance of received assistance. Given its drawbacks, why is proxy warfare nonetheless ubiquitous? Why do state and non-state actors outsource violence when they know proxy war is likely to yield a less than ideal outcome? Why do proxies seek out and accept their help? This chapter discusses the causal logics underpinning wars by proxy and examines their variation by employing an actor-centric perspective that balances the rationales of both the sponsor and proxy.

Why External Actors Work Through Proxies

Literature on proxy warfare offers a thorough list of explanations for its occurrence (Rauta, 2018, 2020, 2021a, 2021b). Geraint Hughes provides three overarching strategic rationales for the use of proxy war – coercion, disruption, and transformative objectives – and adds 11 sub-categories (2012). Hughes' drivers are political constraints on direct military action, security concerns, casualty sensitivity, ideological solidarity, avoidance of direct confrontation, assisting a military campaign, intelligence gathering, nationalist or religious ties, revenge, preserving or enhancing spheres of influence, and greed. Tyrone Groh (2019) offers that risk of escalation, lack of domestic support, lack of international support, and lack of capacity are barriers to direct intervention that interact with a state's relative capabilities, the order of the international system, and the perceived importance of an intrastate conflict to push states to proxy war. More

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succinctly, Daniel Byman (2018) states that proxy wars are fought to limit escalation, support "ideological soulmates," burnish credentials at home, and, in the case of states like Iran, to supplement for low organic capability to project power. Finally, Andrew Mumford argues that states engage in proxy warfare based on interest and ideology, and under conditions where direct forms of intervention would be too costly or unfeasible (2013). Non-state actors typically use proxies for an array of reasons that closely overlap with states' utilization, although there is only scant research on their motives.

This chapter offers three rationales for why state and non-state actors employ proxy war strategies. At the broadest level, the current literature largely identifies that, "belligerents use third parties as either supplementary means of waging war or as a substitute for the direct employment of their own forces" (Hughes, 2012, 2). Where fuller commitment of resources is either unwise (due to limited strategic interest) or unfeasible (due to limited capacity), belligerents seek to achieve objectives through the efforts of others. However, proxy warfare is not only used as a supplement or substitute to direct warfare – sometimes actors choose proxy conflict because it is more effective than direct engagement. Sponsor rationales one and two in the following sections explain how limited interests or constraints lead sponsors to pursue objectives through conflict delegation. Rationale three explains why sponsors might pursue a proxy warfare approach over direct conflict even when unconstrained by resources or will.

Logic 1: Limited Strategic Interests

Not all interventions are aimed at pressing strategic imperatives. Often actors find themselves managing second-tier objectives or reacting to crises which are not security priorities but nonetheless demand action due to political or ideological considerations. When a state's leadership or security apparatus decides to delegate violence, the sponsor assumes that the provision of materiel, operational assistance, or political support can shift the balance of power within a given conflict in favor of the sponsor's proxy and against a target, be it the proxy's foe in an internal conflict or a competing intervener. Importantly, the external actor does not need absolute victory over the target. External actors choose to attend to lesser strategic objectives based on an alignment of interest or ideology, in the pursuit of influence, or out of greed. These motivations are not mutually exclusive, and some combination often drives sponsor support to proxies when a security concern is sufficient to warrant meddling but not important enough to risk limited military resources or the financial well-being of the state.

Alignment

Sponsors often choose to engage in proxy warfare due to alignments of interest with participants in a local conflict. These proxy engagements are not the result of a direct or significant threat to the sponsor itself but derive from opportunities to support a friend or punish a target. This alignment might come from ideological, nationalist, or religious ties with a proxy ("ideological soulmates"). Mumford, and before him John Lewis Gaddis, argued that scholarship has largely underestimated the importance of ideology during the Cold War proxy fights (Mumford, 2013). Russia considered itself "duty bound to aid the exponents of communism" (Mumford, 2013, 35), while an American foreign policy obsessed with "making the world safe for democracy" led to US proxy engagements in Southeast Asia, Central America, and Africa (Mumford, 2013, 37). Political ideology has also played a significant role in Iran's support to proxies in Iraq.

Iran's sponsor–proxy relationships with the three largest Iraqi recipients of Iranian support since 2003 – the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah – rely on geographic proximity, transnational constituencies, and long-standing relationships. Most importantly, all three militias have stated their belief in *velayat-e faqih*, or rule by Islamic clerics, with Iran's Ali Khamenei as their declared primary religious authority.

Iran's proxy intervention in Yemen offers an important example of a lesser alignment, a hard-nosed pragmatic partnership derived from the desire to bloody a common foe. This type of alignment imposes costs on a rival by bolstering the capabilities of a local adversary, often pushing a splinter deeper with a relatively small nudge of resources. The Houthi are not the ideological soulmate that Iran has found in proxies it uses closer to home, but a common enemy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia presents sufficient reason for Iran to act as a spoiler in Yemen. Though imperfect allies over which Iran wields little control, Houthi rebels tie down the Islamic Republic's archrival and provide a geographic platform from which Iran can threaten the Saudis (Baron and Al-Hamdani, 2019). Iran has also provided limited support to Sunni groups simply to punish the United States (Malkasian, 2021).

Importantly, support to proxies based on alignment may be designed to provoke an exploitable overreaction. The civil wars literature identifies that insurgents or terrorists may seek to use spectacular attacks to provoke a target state to overreact, which in turn mobilizes support against the state (Fortna, 2015). In the context of proxy war, the sponsor may seek to provoke the target to increase commitment to a given conflict beyond a sustainable level. By doing so, the sponsor can impose increasing costs on its rival, with minimal impact on its own resources. In addition to undermining the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, with minimal investments the United States successfully provoked the Soviet Union to overcommit to expensive campaigns in Ethiopia and Angola.

Influence

Lacking either the political support or material capacity to directly dominate, sponsors use proxy forces to thriftily expand spheres of influence, to enforce or usurp the regional balance of power, or to demonstrate leadership or dominance to a key elite audience, social group, or set of international actors. The conceptual distinction between alignment and influence lies in perceptions of intent. The quest for greater influence is a proactive driver of proxy sponsorship, where sponsors seek opportunities to expand power and reach through delegation. Proxy warfare for reasons of alignment – aimed at bolstering a friend – has primarily defensive motivations, while influence captures primarily offensive motivations for outsourced violence.

Sponsors use proxies to stretch for things beyond their immediate grasp. Nowhere is this play for coercive influence through proxies more observable than in the Greater Middle East, where the increasing reluctance and decreasing endurance of American involvement have opened a door to regional actors' aspirations. In the Maghreb, Turkish, Emirati, Saudi, and Qatari aspirations for regional dominance collide to prolong Libya's civil war through proxy intervention (Salyk-Virk, 2020). Russia's intervention in Syria is perhaps the most powerful example. With waning clout and no major military presence at risk, Russia focused on preserving Assad's regime, expanding Russian influence in the region, displaying the ability to project power, and undermining US influence in the Levant (Mumford, 2021). Using air strikes, advisors, and weapons to reinvigorate a long but stale relationship with the Syrian regime, Russia successfully upset the power dynamics created over two decades of US intervention. The regime also showcased Russian expeditionary effectiveness to audiences at home and abroad. When

US forces abandoned the Kurds in Syria, Russia stayed. Its influence expanded through a new warmwater port in Tartus and private military companies that occupied infrastructure formerly controlled by the Americans.

States at war pursue opportunities to mobilize proxies as supporting elements or shaping operations – the use of proxies extends a state's military power beyond its organic means, reinforcing its efforts in a broader war. A state may support a local proxy to divert its opponent's resources and attention, or it might use the proxy to conduct shaping efforts for future large-scale operations (Hughes, 2012). In both cases, the use of proxies is an economy-of-force effort employed where direct force is unfeasible. One such case is the British operation during World War I to disrupt Ottoman forces by advising and equipping Arab militias, implemented in part by T.E. Lawrence (Anderson, 2013). An example of using proxies as a shaping operation is the Allies' Operation Jedburgh, which trained and resourced French resistance elements before the Normandy invasion (Irwin, 2006). In both cases, sponsors had ambitious military objectives and yet limited resources to act on them. Under these conditions, potential sponsors might follow the advice of ancient Spartan General Lysander: "For where the lion's skin will not reach, you must patch it out with the fox's" (Leebaert, 2007, 40).

Greed

Sponsors also engage proxies for purposes of greed, to extract or secure economic gains (Hughes, 2012). Russia's proxy intervention in Ukraine prior to 2022, though multifarious in motivation, at least to some degree sought to preserve Russian economic interests. The Donbas is the industrial core of Ukraine while a significant portion of Russian oil and gas exports flow over Ukrainian territory through the Druzhba pipeline (The Economist, 2022). Cynically, Russia also profits enormously from the instability it sows in the Greater Middle East. As the second largest exporter of energy, Russia has enjoyed profit windfalls due to insecurity's knock-on effect to oil and gas prices over the last several years, achieving record revenues during its invasion of Ukraine despite unprecedented international cooperation on sanctions (Myllyvirta *et al.*, 2022). In another example, Charles Taylor of Liberia supported the Revolutionary United Front rebel group in its attacks against the government of Sierra Leone, resulting in a devastating civil war from 1991 to 2002. The motivation for Taylor's actions was securing profitable natural resources, largely diamonds, that could generate personal wealth and support his regional power ambitions (Day, 2015).

Decades of French proxy intervention in Northwest Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa are in part economically motivated. Though the France's presence on the continent is arguably less extractive than that of China, French proxy interventions occur invariably in former colonies where an insurgent element threatens the long-term, postcolonial stability of the state, and hence French economic interests. France has long "considered its former colonies as *pré carré* (private domain)" and protection of uranium access factored into French intervention in at least five African states (Schmidt, 2013). As another example of greed, Hughes points to Angolan, Zimbabwean, Rwandan, and Ugandan government and military elites' financial interests at stake in their respective countries' proxy interventions in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Hughes, 2012). Perhaps one of the most clearly economically motivated proxy interventions was South Africa's 1980s support to RENAMO, the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana. South Africa's patronage was seemingly apolitical and indifferent to revolution, instead squarely aimed at severing Mozambique's economic ties to other countries and increasing Mozambique's, Zimbabwe's, and Malawi's economic dependence on Praetoria (Patten, 2013).

Logic 2: Constraints on Direct Intervention

The decision to engage in proxy warfare is driven by cost sensitivity, political risk, and escalation avoidance. The inability to absorb the potential downsides of direct intervention in any of these areas leads states to pursue war by indirect means. Policymakers must judiciously apply limited financial, human, physical, and political capital. Where objectives are limited or secondary, so will be the means chosen to pursue them. This is particularly true in war, an expensive and bloody undertaking that reveals weaknesses and limitations to adversaries. Direct conflict comes with potential political, materiel, and human costs that can far exceed those of indirect conflict. This risk differential led President Eisenhower to argue that supporting anti-communist proxies during the Cold War was the "cheapest insurance in the world," advancing US interests while avoiding the costs associated with direct war (Mumford, 2013, 100). Where financial depth, political considerations, or security risks constrain military adventurism, states will often choose indirect intervention through a proxy as a substitute for direct intervention. In other cases, states may have strategic imperatives behind which they would throw their full weight but nonetheless find their weight in manpower and materiel insufficient for the cause.

Cost Sensitivity

Direct conflict is bloodier and more expensive than indirect conflict (though for the proxy, target, or indigenous population proxy wars can be incredibly costly). Limited military capability, concerns about financial costs, and casualty sensitivity all drive states toward indirect intervention (Hughes, 2012). Proxy war lets others absorb the financial and physical costs. As Byman (2018) bluntly put it, proxy warfare is "intervention on the cheap," and "the proxy does the dying."

The financial costs associated with large-scale combat operations are staggering. US defense spending during World War I and World War II comprised over 14% and 35% of gross domestic product, respectively. The former cost $382 billion in under two years, while the latter cost over $4 trillion in under four years. The Gulf War, the US invasion of Iraq in 1991, cost $117 billion in seven months (Office of Public Affairs, 2021). In contrast, the US and Saudi support to the Afghan mujahideen during the 1980s – precipitating the USSR's withdrawal from Afghanistan – totaled $3.5 billion over ten years (Hilali, 2005). The attending financial costs of the Soviets' direct intervention to prop up their client state in the face of an externally supported rebellion? – over $50 billion (Directorate of Intelligence, 1987).

Though two very different conflicts, comparison of Iran's recent employment of proxies in Iraq to its conventional 1980s conflict with Saddam Hussein's Baathis state provides an interesting contrast between conventional war and proxy war in the same location. In the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, 218,867 Iranians succumbed to war injuries, including 56,575 Artesh regulars; 41,040 members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC); and some 90,000 Basiji volunteers (Zargar *et al.*, 2007). In almost 20 years of engagement in post-Saddam Iraq, the Islamic Republic has lost perhaps a few hundred IRGC operators while successfully running proxy Iraqi militias to fight against the Islamic State (IS) and, to a more limited extent, to disrupt US state building efforts. In five years of close combat deployments alongside partners in Syria from 2011 to 2016, the IRGC lost roughly 340 personnel (Alfoneh and Eisenstadt, 2016). Over the same time span, pro-government forces supported by the IRGC lost upward of 100,000 troops.

Political Risk

A sponsor may choose to engage in proxy warfare to circumvent political constraints (Hughes, 2012). There are two major political risks: lack of domestic support for intervention and the potential international opprobrium. The politics of intervention is essential, sometimes more important to decision-makers than other constraints. Domestically, a state may substitute proxy warfare for direct intervention out of concern for domestic audience costs. Internationally, a sponsor may be concerned about the impact to legitimacy, good standing, or prestige wrought by direct intervention. Indirect intervention mitigates the risks.

Domestic audiences may not be tolerant of military interventions, especially as costs rise (Groh, 2019). The accumulating tolls of lengthy intervention are likely to decrease a domestic public's tolerance over time. Concerns about audience costs will lead states, particularly democracies, to be reluctant to engage in risky direct conflicts (Fearon, 1994). This may hold even for wars that are very popular at the outset. For example, while the initial US invasion of Afghanistan had robust domestic support of over 90% in favor, 62% of Americans thought the war was not worth fighting by the time of withdrawal (Shortridge, 2021). Indeed, Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden all faced strong domestic pressures to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan. When governments anticipate that a direct intervention may break their grip on power, policy-makers may opt for a less costly proxy option.

Sponsors may also be concerned with the revelatory nature of war and its impact on international prestige. While Russia's proxy efforts in Syria made the revanchist regime and its military appear strong (Mumford, 2021), outright war in Ukraine has revealed rampant gundecking, command-and-control issues, and outright tactical incompetency. Likewise, though Russian support of proxies in Eastern Ukraine from 2014 to 2022 brought condemnation, the condemnation was nothing near the attention and enhanced international sanctions that actual conventional invasion brought in 2022. Iran's intervention in Iraq through proxy Shi'i militias from 2004 to the present did nothing to hurt the prestige of the Artesh, Iran's conventional army. If anything, the intervention bolstered the prestige of Iranian military strategists and the Islamic Republic's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, whose Quds Force is now frequently held up as the gold standard of expeditionary proxy warfare.

Escalation Avoidance

Direct participation in conflict may come at the risk of escalation to the point of annihilation (Byman, 2018). Proxy warfare may avoid escalatory dynamics by not crossing red lines (Groh, 2019). States seemingly have a higher tolerance for indirect intervention against their interests than for direct military aggression. Concern about escalation to nuclear annihilation is a powerful motivator to substitute lower risk proxy warfare for direct conflict. Rigorous analysis of the stability-instability paradox did not find support that the presence of nuclear weapons increases limited direct conflicts (Bell and Miller, 2015). However, a lack of data on indirect conflict means the authors only examined low-level direct conflicts and not whether nuclear weapons lead states to engage in more indirect conflict. Ongoing research finds that the presence of nuclear weapons dramatically increases the probability states will engage in indirect conflict with each other. The implications are that when nuclear annihilation looms over any given conflicting dyad, proxy warfare provides a viable substitute for direct conflict by lowering the risk of conflict escalation.

Sponsors may also support proxies against a significantly more powerful rival, which if directly challenged could pose an existential threat to the sponsor. Iran's sponsorship of militias in Iraq and Syria and its close bonds with Hezbollah are two examples of how working through

proxies creates some aspect of distance and unaccountability that would not exist in military intervention with conventional forces. Iran's proxies in Iraq repeatedly attacked US forces prior to the first US withdrawal from Iraq. When the United States scaled up its presence again in the counter-IS fight, Iranian proxies frequently found themselves at odds with the US intervention or diplomatic presence. While the assassination of Qasem Soleimani might have been retaliation for these provocations, it occurred in Iraq, and Iran has not suffered any major US attacks on the Iranian homeland. Likewise, despite a view of Hezbollah as an extension of the Islamic Republic, the organization's repeated violations of Israeli sovereignty and attacks on Israeli forces in Lebanon have only brought limited retaliatory strikes on the Islamic Republic. It is difficult to imagine that a large-scale attack on Israeli interests by either the IRGC or Artesh would not bring devastating conventional retaliation from Israel.

Many have proffered that proxy war provides plausible deniability, with the trope of sponsors embarking on proxy war for its deniability or secrecy common to most foundational and theoretical works. In truth, operations that generate strategic effect are almost certain to be exposed. Even most covert actions are observable and accrue strategic benefits in their visibility (Carson, 2018). It is possible that proxy actors will lie and get away with it. It may also be the case that both sides of a conflict are willing to embrace a denial even though both know it is a lie, particularly where it avoids costly and deadly escalation (Atwell *et al.*, 2021). The benefits of this implausible deniability are also evident in how proxy warfare limits horizontal escalation. For instance, China's use of its maritime militia to assert dominance in the South China Sea perturbs individual countries in an isolated manner. Overt coercive naval action might trigger a unified response, but as yet, dismissive violations of state sovereignty in isolated locations have not hurt China in other seas or territories.

Logic 3: Local Ownership as Optimal Means

Rationales one and two explain reasons that sponsors seek to substitute or supplement direct military action with proxy warfare. However, under some circumstances, working through proxies may be the optimal means toward achieving the sponsor's objectives, even without constraints to action. Local forces typically have informational advantages – they intimately know the terrain, human and physical. They come with established local capacity, local legitimacy, and valid local grievances. They will be perceived as more legitimate than an external intervener. By training, equipping, and otherwise enabling the local actor, a sponsor increases the proxy's capacity and optimizes these advantages. Local ownership also allows a sponsor to circumvent fielding a large expeditionary force, which even for an unconstrained military comes with an inevitable reduction in forces on-hand for homeland defense.

In the context of fighting insurgents or non-state actors, incumbent governments face an identification challenge where they struggle to distinguish civilian non-combatants from civilian-garbed rebel fighters (Kalyvas, 2006). The identification challenge is even more prominent between external and indigenous actors, as external actors will lack fidelity on both the human and physical terrain. Sponsors would rather rely on local knowledge to efficiently exercise selective violence rather than deploying culturally and linguistically challenged external troops who both lack political context and struggle to identify combatants from non-combatants. As Jentzsch *et al.* (2015, 759) argue about the use of local militia forces, "[i]n particular, extensive resources and a dire need for local collaboration led imperial, colonial, and foreign occupying powers to rely extensively on local militias." In more practical terms, the US Army Special Operations community has embraced the concept of pursuing national security interventions through the "indigenous approach."

Regarding legitimacy, the justness of a war may depend on perceptions about who the belligerents are. It is easier to support the aggrieved local victim of an abusive attacker than an intervention by a foreigner which might be construed as imperialistic or greed-motivated in nature. Proxy interventions most often take the form of providing support to an existing actor in a civil war. Indigenous actors have established local capacity and do not require an intervener to build combat power. The existing actors that are attractive to sponsors for partnership will likely have grievances that resonate locally. The actors are, in turn, seen as legitimate by some portion of the local population, whereas intervening troops could very well be seen as illegitimate actors by all sides. Furthermore, support to a local faction creates a narrative for external intervention that, whether real or conjured, sells better at home and in the international arena than direct military action.

Reflecting on the American intervention against the Islamic State in Syria, one can observe how the desirability of local ownership led to the choice of a proxy strategy. Americans had recent memories of the challenges faced in navigating the geography and politics of Afghanistan and Iraq with regular army formations. Those interventions had been in countries where they had decades of involvement, but Syria was entirely new terrain. Local expertise was critical to avoiding another quagmire. The Kurds saw in IS a real existential threat. Their fight was legitimate to the Syrian Kurdish population in the country's north, as was the subsequently expanded Syrian Democratic Forces' fight for Syrian Arab recruits as the offensive pushed south and east. Fostering local ownership of the conflict by supporting Kurdish rebels in a fight against takfiri extremists provided a compelling narrative for American and international consumption. Iran's localization of conflict through proxies, on the other hand, was informed primarily by legitimacy: Not only did the Islamic Republic have limited ability to field a large expeditionary force and perceive a need to maintain its homeland deterrent, but the Persian Shiite theocracy was also keenly self-aware of how an incursion might be perceived as illegitimate by Arab Sunni populations.

Why Proxies Seek External Support

External support most often occurs in the context of insurgency or civil war. Insurgents and rebels are frequently weak relative to an existing state. The most obvious rationale for a proxy accepting sponsorship is the actual need for tangible support, the goods received by the proxy in exchange for its visitation of violence on a common enemy. In addition to weapons and materiel, sponsors of an insurgency may provide rebel forces with key organizational functions and less tangible support such as diplomatic pressure, organization and unity, or a sort of ideological overhead, giving the rebels a cause and helping with narrative and communication (Byman, 2013).

What goods are exchanged in a proxy relationship varies from instance to instance. Hughes's "direct relationship of assistance" requires some combination of funding, training, arming, equipping, providing sanctuary, and augmenting proxy forces (Hughes, 2012, 12). The relationship may involve active management ("control, planning, and direction") or more passive support ("training, logistical, and financial"). The sponsor may offer intelligence, operational planning, the provision of a safe haven, and political cover (Moghadam and Wyss, 2020). The sponsor may also provide foreign fighters, particularly in cases of a non-state actors as sponsors (Byman, 2013). The categories of support can be broken down broadly into materiel and tactical support, operational support, and political overhead and strategic support. Iranian support to Shiite militias in Iraq to counter IS provides a well-rounded example of all three levels of support.

Materiel and Tactical Support

Materiel support sought by proxies in modern conflicts often includes small arms, ammunition, and explosives at the base level, scaling up to significantly larger systems. In Iraq, Iran supplied its proxies with artillery, improvised explosive devices, personnel carriers, anti-tank missiles, air defense systems, rockets, and unmanned aerial vehicles (Katzman, 2018). The Iranians transferred arms to the tactical units and set up drone bases and communications nodes to assist with command (Ostovar, 2016). Iran also returned Iraqi jets that the Islamic Republic had held since the Gulf War (Ostovar, 2016). Iran's primary tactical support to the Iraqi militias came in the form of the advisors and augmentees that accompanied weapons and materiel. Junior liaison officers with extended deployment cycles and career-long attachment to their proxy groups provided tactical-level leadership (Watling, 2020). In addition to these advisor engagements, combat force augmentees were often provided to the groups. Over 2,000 Basij are believed to have crossed the border to fight in the IS campaign, often embedding with proxy tactical units and participating in close combat (Ostovar, 2016). Quds Force advisors actively took part in combat in Tikrit, Fallujah, Ramadi, Tal Afar, and Mosul. Descriptions point to Quds Force operatives providing the *up and out* – managing and coordinating what would have been chaotic and disparate efforts across forces that did not share a command structure – skills that would not have been an organic capability of militia commanders. They coordinated fires, identified minefields, directed engineering assets to build defensive positions, and provided anti-armor teams (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019). This coordination is said to have even extended to parallel US targeting efforts, with fighters reporting "that Iranian ground operatives and Shia militiamen transmit target information to the Iraqi security forces, which in turn, share it with US forces" (Tabatabai and Esfandiary, 2017).

An important, often preeminent, aspect of modern proxy sponsorship has been the provision of tactical air support. Arguably the most important element of support provided to the Northern Alliance in its fight against Taliban forces in 2001 was not the small group of US advisors but the hundreds of bombing sorties flown in the first few weeks to aid the local militias' offensive (Ratnesar, 2001). The broad applicability of the so-called Afghan Model is a source of debate, but what seems beyond reproach is that air strikes and a light footprint of coordinating advisors has "proved very powerful in assisting competent allies and destroying unskilled enemies" (Biddle, 2005, 167). In Libya, a tangled web of sponsors conducted over 4,000 air strikes from 2012 to 2020 (Salyk-Virk, 2020). The United States, Italy, France, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Egypt, and even Chad provided air support to their respective local proxies (Salyk-Virk, 2020). While Libya's disintegration offers a warning on the strategic limits of proxy warfare, recent research points to proxies' tactical application of sponsors' airpower as a key driver of success in short-duration proxy engagements in Libya and Syria (Cragin, 2020).

Operational Support

Operational support sought by proxies includes intelligence, planning, training, theater logistics, and provision of sanctuary. A differentiating factor of the IRGC as a sponsor is its business prowess. Acquired business acumen, firmly rooted in logistics, gives Iran a unique capability to build clandestine supporting infrastructure for proxy warfare with an alacrity and competency that its competitors could only dream of. In terms of theater logistics, Iran used these IRGC networks to push a full suite of logistical support to its proxies in Iraq (Katzman, 2018). From a planning perspective, the Quds Force was deeply embedded in the processes of its

proxies and of the Iraqi state. As early as 2006, Iran was believed to have 150 Quds Force advisors and intelligence personnel on the ground in Iraq (Levitt, 2013). Islamic State fight, *The Economist* reported, "In Iraq the fighting is being coordinated mainly by Iran" (The Economist, 2015). Hezbollah and Iranian training programs for Iraqi militias trained up to 60 militants at a time, lasted approximately three weeks, and had elaborate personnel movement mechanisms in place to bring Iraqis to the training camps (Levitt, 2013). According to the director of the US Defense Intelligence Agency in 2010, Quds Force and Hezbollah training in Iran at the time included "small arms, reconnaissance, small unit tactics, and communications [as well as] more specialized training in assassinations, kidnappings, or explosives" (US Senate, 2010). In addition to basic militia training courses, there were also Hezbollah and Quds Force–led advanced courses for special operations personnel (long-distance marksmanship, diving, intelligence collection, tactical driving, anti–aircraft systems, and management) and master trainers (including train-the-trainer courses in explosives, fire support, anti–aircraft systems, and guerrilla warfare) in both Iran and Lebanon (Levitt, 2013). The Iranian training camps were reported to provide religious indoctrination as well, sensitizing militia members to Khomeinist Shia ideology (Felter and Fishman, 2008).

Political Overhead and Strategic Support

Strategic support in proxy warfare entails branding and messaging, ideological overhead, financing and fundraising, and international advocacy. In Iraq, Iran's primary Shiite proxy groups found a sense of purpose in goals they shared with their sponsor, ideology, and the narrative of Shia revolution. Iranian fatwas and clerical advocacy of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) made the proxies' cause a holy one. The IRGC's propaganda machine*, Payam-e Enqelab*, published articles tying Iraqi Shia militia efforts against the Islamic State to a global axis of resistance, giving the proxies a global brand among regime sympathizers. Iranian broadcasting pushed ideological content throughout the country, while the IRGC assisted its proxies with internal and external branding. This is clearly seen in the iconography of the primary proxy organizations, all of which had branding derived from Hezbollah and the IRGC, rooted in the Islamic Revolution. The biggest marketing success for the IRGC was to the Iraqi government, promoting and subsequently leveraging a formalized PMF role in the Ministry of Interior. This coup put Iraqi agent and Kata'ib Hezbollah chief, al-Muhandis, in a formal position of power in Iraq's security apparatus, providing Iran's proxies an additional source of funding and security apparatus cover for Quds Force–influenced operations.

The proxies also sought significant financial support from Iran. Asaib Ahl al-Haq received US$1.5 to US$2 million per month in 2014. As early as 2005, the Badr Organization was receiving US$3 million per month from Tehran, an amount that would have increased substantially by the time of the counter-IS campaign. Kata'ib Hezbollah's funding has not been reliably ascertained, but as a favorite of Iran it may have received as much as US$5 million per month. The IRGC was able to move large sums of money to Iraqi proxies easily and quickly through the robust courier network that had formed around its extensive businesses. In addition to these funds, Soleimani and al-Muhandis's successful advocacy for the formalization of the PMF's role by Iraq's Ministry of Interior won the militias a place on the Iraqi government's payroll.

Proxy Motivations and Partnering Preferences

An insurgent group seeking external support will look to maximize both the resources at its disposal for its campaign and the autonomy it has over its actions (Salehyan *et al.*, 2011). Rebel

groups are often competing with significantly stronger states and so may seek external sponsors for rapid augmentation of their capabilities, but they must weigh this support against an attending loss in autonomy as resources from foreign patrons often come with strings attached or attempts to control the rebels' agenda (Salehyan *et al.*, 2011). It follows that groups are more likely to partner with external sponsors when they have similar goals, or a convergence of preferences, that make the imposition of unwelcome constraints less likely. This desire for shared goals may point to partnerships with sponsors who have shared ethnic or religious traditions (Salehyan *et al.*, 2011). Rebel groups are also more motivated to look for outside funding when they have limited domestic sources of funds or lack domestic support for their ideas, and when multiple patrons limit risks to their autonomy (Salehyan, 2010).

Some research breaks down proxies into *activists* and *opportunists* (Biberman, 2019). The former form bonds that are transactional and pragmatic, based on the need for patronage and protection. The latter form bonds that are relational, based on shared social identity or creed. Activists have sought a certain type of supporter and are "willing to take big risks in assisting their ally," while opportunists strike agreements only when the risks are low and the benefits clearly outweigh the costs (Biberman, 2019, 159). In the end, despite any acute needs for support or close alignment with a sponsor, proxies will remain primarily motivated "more by their internal group dynamics, ideology, and/or a sense of what is needed for their own survival and expansion" than any sponsor agenda (Ollivant and Gaston, 2019). As one civil war scholar notes, unstable alignments are "more than just a characteristic of these wars – in many ways, they are the war, with repeated side switching fueling cycles of protracted violence" (Seymour, 2014, 92).

Any discussion of proxy groups' strategic rationales and partnering preferences should be caveated by pointing out that these groups are composed of individual fighters whose motivations are diverse. Despite their sponsors' objectives, fighters in the civil war in Syria are often "driven by parochial – even personal – issues" (Beehner, 2015). Extensive fieldwork has been done in recent years to canvas fighters in current proxy wars. There is a clear contrast between the motivations of foreign fighters and the motivations of locals, with the latter less likely to be motivated by ideology than local concerns, personal grievance, or revenge seeking (Mironova and Whitt, 2014). However, individual fighters are assimilated into their groups where "they are vulnerable to elite manipulation," experience "ideological and religious indoctrination," and ultimately have their grievances channeled into the group's purposes (Mironova *et al.*, 2014, 15).

Conclusion

History is replete with proxy conflict, and a survey of the international system suggests proxy warfare will continue to play a prominent role in international relations. The ongoing war in Syria is but one of many current conflicts demonstrating how proxy warfare increases the complexity of modern battlefields. At various points, external interveners in that internal war – to include the United States, Russia, Turkey, Jordan, Qatar, France, the United Arab Emirates, Iran as well as non-state groups Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Wagner Group – have trained, equipped, provided intelligence support to, or fought alongside their favored indigenous groups. Each sponsor and proxy had distinct motivations. Similar reasoning has driven actors to employ proxy strategies in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, and multiple other conflicts.

With proxy warfare ubiquitous and ascendant, national security practitioners and security studies scholars must understand the underlying motivations for why actors use proxy war strategies. A sponsor chooses conflict delegation to address problems that are second-tier priorities or